SCIENCE HAS PROVEN 6-20-1998
"YOUR BEST SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE IS STILL ONLY OPINION"

IT ISN'T WORKING AS PLANNED
AND NEVER WILL

Steve Golanbeck, a Bay Conservation and Development District executive, stands on a hilltop near Hamilton Field in Marin County to give officials and the public an overview of wetlands projects.

'Plumbing' clog stalls tidal marsh

Sediment pattern missing at ponds

By JAMES W. SWEENEY 6-20-98
Staff Writer

A lone egret steps gently through tufts of pickleweed and a blue heron swoops low overhead, each foraging in a shallow saltwater pond at Sonoma Baylands.

Four years ago, this was dry land, a farm diked off from San Pablo Bay.

It's now part of a wetlands project that has attracted national attention — and a White House endorsement — as an example of environmental and economic cooperation, using mud dredged from the Port of Oakland to help restore a tidal marsh near the mouth of the Petaluma River.

An even larger restoration project at the old Hamilton Air Force Base a few miles away is on the fast track for approval.

But even supporters of the Sonoma Baylands project concede it isn't working as planned.

The saltwater ponds are scenic, and they already are providing habitat for migratory birds like the egret seen there one recent morning. What's missing is the tidal action necessary to recreate a true marsh as existed before the bay was diked in the 19th century.

It was the prospect of a tidal marsh and habitat for the California clapper rail and other endangered species that secured broad support — and public funding — for the project. ← YOUR $$

Sonoma Baylands cannot yet be declared a failure, however.

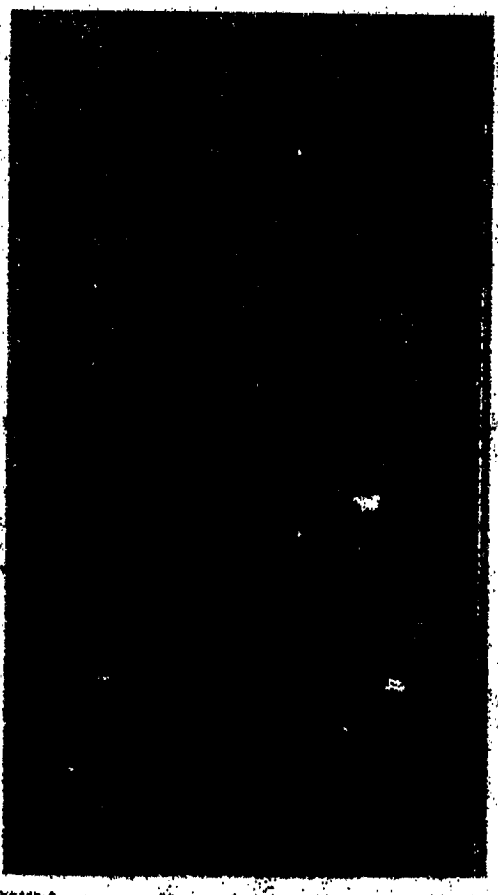
"It's really more of a plumbing problem," said Will Travis, executive director of the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission, one of several state and federal agencies that participated in the project.

Even critics say that tidal action could be enhanced at the site, moving the project toward the original vision of a 322-acre marsh healthy with pickleweed and other lush, green vegetation, fed by a network of saltwater channels that rise and fall with the tide.

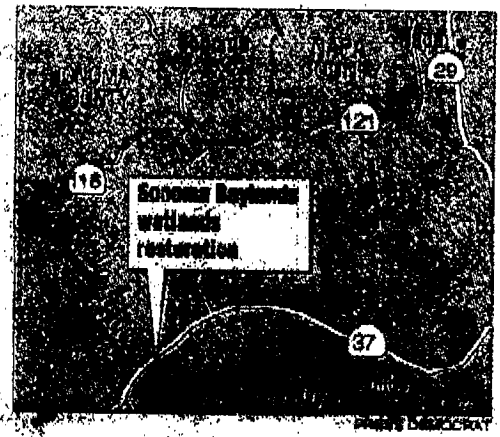
"The only way you can build a marsh is by bringing in sediment on the tide," said Phil LaRiviere of Mountain View, a wetlands activist and self-styled swamp physicist. "If there is no tide, there is no building."

After the area was diked and the water pumped off, the land sank up to eight feet below sea level. The dredge material from Oakland was used to raise it back toward sea level and tides were expected to complete the project by dropping sediment in natural patterns.

But the ponds are separated from San Pablo Bay by about 300 yards of existing marsh and the channels feeding them aren't providing sufficient sediment and tidal action, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



Killdeer, a medium-sized plover, make their home at the Sonoma Baylands project.



A project started more than a year later on the Petaluma River nearby is advancing at a much faster pace, in large part because it was able to develop a full tidal exchange soon after the levee was breached.

That project, known as Gray's Marsh, is visible from the Petaluma River bridge on Highway 37.

The Sonoma Baylands, near Port Sonoma-Marin, was supposed to be restored within 20 years but "it may be hard to meet that deadline," according to Peter Baye, a Fish and Wildlife Service ecologist monitoring the project.

To solve the problem, Baye said, the agency supports creation of additional channels linking the ponds to the bay.

"I'm hoping everyone will agree we should do something," he said, adding, "we're not on the same wavelength yet."

That decision rests with the Army Corps of Engineers, which is managing the project and isn't ready to act yet. "We're looking at it as a demonstration project and we don't necessarily want to go in and tinker with it," project manager Rod Chisholm said.

In the meantime, the Bay Conservation and Development District is pushing ahead with its Hamilton Field wetlands project, which

See Marsh, Page B2

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